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Three crucial months for Nicaragua

Getting cues from Havana

The long, ambiguous civil war in Nicaragua has reached a critical turning point, and both sides recognize that what happens in the next three months can determine the final outcome.

The Sandinista National Directorate of nine *comandantes* in Managua is being urged by its influential Cuban advisers to eliminate the armed opposition of the "contras" before the United States has time to intervene effectively with renewed military assistance. In line with that advice, the recent bold raid into Honduras was a costly attempt to knock out the main "contra" training base and to force the Hondurans to seal the border.

According to accurate intelligence reporting, the Sandinista leaders are known to believe that U.S. military aid will prove "irrelevant" to the outcome if it can be postponed past this June. They plan to exploit to the maximum any delays in arms deliveries imposed by the U.S. Congress in order to drive out the 6,000 "contra" guerrillas still inside Nicaragua, to eradicate their base of popular support in the countryside, and to intimidate both Honduras and Costa Rica into closing their borders.

Pentagon officials admit that this strategy is well-designed to take full advantage of the fact that since June 1984

the U.S. Congress has prohibited the delivery of any American weaponry to the "contras" and banned the provision of any military training.

In direct contrast, the Soviets during this period have supplied advanced weaponry and Cuban-piloted helicopter gunships to the Sandinistas, with the result that "contra" field commanders are now urgently pleading for anti-aircraft weapons to protect their troops.

Moreover, the non-lethal assistance that the U.S. Congress finally did authorize last year has now expired, and it had the reverse effect of that intended. Instead of encouraging other governments and private groups to expand their assistance, it caused them to reduce their aid, on the assumption that the United States as a superpower was now back in the game.

The Sandinistas have exploited to the hilt the fact that ammunition and supply shortages have temporarily compelled most of the "contras" to pull back into Honduras. Claiming in their pervasive propaganda a military victory they have not won, the Sandinistas have also ruthlessly retaliated against peasant families and local villagers who were known to have supported the "contras."

Under these circumstances and until American military assistance begins again, the momentum of the struggle is clearly with the Sandinistas. It is amazing, in fact, that the on-again, off-again nature of American support has not more deeply discouraged the "contras," and the unwillingness of neighboring countries to commit themselves to the "contra" cause is easy to understand, in view of their uncertainty as to how the U.S. Congress will finally decide.

In the shadow of this imminent consolidation of the first Marxist power base on the mainland of the Americas, Reagan officials are mounting a full court press in the House of Representatives to obtain on April 15 a bipartisan majority in favor of the kind of compromise that was approved in the U.S. Senate last

month. If this \$100 million assistance package is passed by both Houses, the "contras" would receive immediately \$25 million in emergency aid for medicines, training, and defensive armament such as Stinger shoulder-fired missiles.

In order to try to persuade the Sandinistas to negotiate with the opposition for a return to democracy, there would be a 90-day waiting period before President Reagan could commit the remaining \$75 million of military and humanitarian aid. Once committed, this assistance spread over an 18-month period could give the armed resistance new credibility and shift the momentum of the struggle against the Sandinistas to the point where they might negotiate seriously.

At the least, American weaponry, communications gear, training, and logistical support would give the "contras" the capability to regain lost ground and to keep the Sandinistas so preoccupied with their own defense that they would not have resources to spare for subverting their neighbors. Most significantly, this decision by the U.S. Congress would send a message throughout the region that the United States was prepared to stand by its friends and allies.

As Secretary of State George Shultz has admitted to a group of legislators, it may well prove to be the case that the administration will have to ask the Congress for an additional \$100 million at the end of 18 months, if the struggle for Nicaragua continues. But such assistance to native Nicaraguans who are prepared to fight their own battles is much to be preferred to the grim alternative of sending in the U.S. Marines.

Contrary to the belief of the House Democratic leadership that help to the "contras" will lead to the inevitable commitment of American troops, the reverse is true.

A failure to give the democratic opposition adequate assistance now will leave the United States with no alternative later but to send its own forces into dubious battle in an area where past American armed interventions have not been forgiven or forgotten.